



FDA Written Evidence to the Assembly Committee for Finance Inquiry into Performance and Culture of the NI Civil Service

Background to the FDA

The following is submitted on behalf of the FDA union, one of the officially recognised civil service unions in Northern Ireland (NI). Our membership is drawn from grades 7 and 6, senior civil servants, graduate management programme participants, and prosecutors in the Public Prosecution Service NI. The FDA represents 26,000 civil and public servants across the UK, with specific focus on managers and leaders. The FDA is an independent, impartial trade union without any political affiliation. The FDA is led by General Secretary Dave Penman and supported in NI by National Officer Robert Murtagh, and the NI Section Committee led by Convenor Robbie Davis. The FDA is affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC), we are also affiliates of the European Federation of Public Services Unions (EPSU).

Summary of the FDA's evidence

- You cannot divorce performance and culture of the civil service from performance of the Executive and wider political culture in NI.
- There are structural challenges stemming from our system of government where there is no collective responsibility, no centre of gravity and departments operate largely independently of each other, making prioritisation of resources challenging.
- Our system of government creates unique structures and accountability mechanisms within the civil service that are not analogous to Scotland or Wales. This structure can also create tensions between departments and 'the centre'.

- Political instability, collapse of the Executive and lack of multi-year budgets hinder delivery and transformation. This is on top of exogenous shocks such as COVID-19 and Brexit.
- Outside of institutional reform, of which the FDA takes no position, transformation must be done within the current constitutional framework that will necessarily place a ceiling on what can be achieved.
- The FDA supports ‘The People Strategy’ as a key tenet to transformation, particularly strategic workforce planning which is underway and is vital to ensuring ‘right people, right skills, right place’.
- Investment and enhancement of the graduate management programme is an opportunity to increase the capacity and capability of the civil service, while also reducing the median age.
- The NICS has low ‘digital maturity’ that must be tackled. This must be done with the workforce, with investment in new technologies including AI, but most importantly with training and support for civil servants to fully utilise the opportunities and efficiencies digitalisation and AI can bring.
- The civil service must continue to show that it is an attractive place to work, particularly to appeal to a new generation of workers, by ensuring pay and conditions are competitive with the private sector.

Recommendations

The FDA recommends that the Committee:

- Recognises that many of the barriers to NICS performance stem from the wider governance arrangements of the Northern Ireland Executive and cannot be resolved through civil service reform alone.
- Ensure any recommendations relating to the structure of the NICS, the Head of the Civil Service or permanent secretaries are fully considered within the context of Northern Ireland's unique constitutional framework.
- Supports the implementation of the NICS People Strategy, with particular focus on Strategic Workforce Planning to address future skills and capacity needs.
- Encourages the Executive to move towards multi-year budgets to support long-term planning, transformation and delivery.
- Supports renewed investment in the Graduate Management Programme to strengthen leadership succession and attract a new generation of talent into the NICS.
- Supports a strategic approach to digital transformation and AI, underpinned by investment in workforce skills and capability.

Introduction

The FDA welcomes the Committee's inquiry into performance and culture of the NICS. There are a plethora of challenges facing the NICS, some of which are outlined in the terms of reference for this inquiry and were the subject of the recent NI audit office report on 'Leading and Resourcing the NICS', a follow up to the 'Capacity and Capability in the NICS' published in 2020.

Public service delivery in NI faces serious headwinds, highlighted recently by Former Head of the Civil Service, Sir David Sterling KCB, who outlined delays in dealing with issues, an aging population and increased demand in public services putting real pressure on finances.¹ In that context, all parties in the NI Executive agree on the need for public sector transformation², which includes transformation of the civil service. As ever, the challenge is not transformation, but what transformation means in practice.

The FDA recognises the Executive consensus on the need for transformation of the public sector and the civil service and is keen to play a constructive and pragmatic role to support sustainable transformation that delivers better outcomes for the people of NI. However, transformation can only be successful if it is underpinned by a consistent and coherent vision for public service delivery. This key point is a significant challenge for our 4-party mandatory coalition.

While there are important lessons to be learned from the recent Audit Office report, we have stated publicly that there are legitimate reasons as to why key initiatives from the previous report in 2020 haven't been fully achieved. This is a result of exogenous factors including COVID-19 pandemic, Executive collapse, Windsor Framework implementation and ongoing budgetary challenges. Despite this significant context, most of the action points have been achieved or are currently progressing.

The FDA supports 'The NICS People Strategy 2025-30' and its ambitions to create a culture of continuous learning, innovation and inclusivity, underpinned by civil service values of impartiality, integrity, objectivity and honesty, ensuring our workforce can deliver better outcomes for the people we serve. This includes a renewed focus on skills and capacity, experience and environment and leadership and inclusion³. While the People Strategy is a positive development and will help transform the NICS, it is not a panacea to the challenges facing public service delivery in NI.

¹ [Sir David Sterling KCB, former Head of Civil Service, Irish News, 29 March 2026](#)

² [Programme for Government 2024 - 2027](#), page 55

³ NICS People Strategy 2025-30

Challenges facing the Northern Ireland Civil Service

Structural challenges

A key tenet of understanding the ongoing challenges facing the NICS and the challenge of transformation is recognising the structural challenges our unique system of government poses, this is particularly relevant when comparing to other devolved administrations.

The NI Executive and Assembly remain largely unchanged since the Good Friday Agreement, while there have been intermittent changes - St. Andrews, 'Fresh Start' and 'New Decade, New Approach' - the fundamentals of power-sharing and consociational mandatory coalition government remain the same. This system of government is widely accepted as prioritising stability and survivability over effectiveness in policy delivery.

The FDA is not advocating for reform of the institutions or continuation of the status quo; this is a fundamentally political question. However, we do have an obligation to acknowledge when assessing performance of the civil service the inherent challenges in the structure of our government. The COVID inquiry recognised this challenge:

“In Northern Ireland, the power sharing arrangements weakened the ability of the executive to respond, and decision making by the Northern Ireland Executive itself was marred by political disputes.”⁴

The fundamental challenge for transformation, particularly in the current budget situation is prioritisation of funding and resources. However, the NI Executive operates without collective responsibility, with nine departments operationally independent of each other, except on issues that are cross-cutting or controversial and require whole Executive approval.⁵ Again, Baroness Hallett acknowledged this as part of the COVID inquiry:

“The power-sharing arrangements in Northern Ireland are designed to ensure that each department has a significant degree of operational independence and individual ministers are afforded significant autonomy.”

Each department has their own Permanent Secretary who is the Accounting Officer, accountable to their individual Minister and the Assembly. This is one example where our system departs from prima facie analogous administrations in Scotland and Wales. Both Scottish and Welsh governments have one Permanent Secretary, who is the Principal Accounting Officer for the entire Government and accountable to their

⁴ [Covid-19 inquiry](#), Modules 2, 2A, 2B, 2C, Volume 1, Government decision-making (Chapter 1), pg 10, Feb 2026

⁵ St Andrews Agreement, 2009, 4 (a)

respective First Ministers. The Head of the NI Civil Service is more akin to the Head of the UK Civil Service/Cabinet Secretary who is, likewise, not an Accounting Officer. However, the main difference between the two roles is that the Cabinet Secretary is accountable to the Prime Minister, who is ‘Primus Inter Pares’ (first among equals) and Minister for the Civil Service⁶. The Head of the NI Civil Service is accountable to both the First and Deputy First Minister. The NI Minister with responsibility for the civil service is the Minister of Finance, however this extends mostly to issues of personnel and policy rather than the direction of departmental resources, except when a Ministerial Direction is given by any Minister, which requires approval from the Finance Minister or the Executive as a whole⁷. The Head of the NI Civil Service is a unique position that draws similarities to counterparts in Scotland, Wales and UK Government but is fundamentally and constitutionally distinct due to the structure of our government in NI.

It is often commented that the civil service operates with a ‘silo-mentality’. While undoubtedly, as in any large organisation, there may be individuals who operate on this basis, this analysis overstates the role of individuals and understates the fact that the structure is constitutionally siloed. As stated, at a political level, NI does not retain a ‘centre of gravity’ that can direct priorities and resources and working across government becomes a challenge at official level. It is not, however, impossible and efforts are underway to break down this silo working.

The role of Head of the NI Civil Service is to, as far as possible, champion the programme for government (PfG), foster collaboration and cross-departmental working by bringing together officials including permanent secretaries and to oversee the strategic direction of the NICS including HR policies and to co-ordinate on issues like The People Strategy and Strategic Investment. The Head of the NI Civil Service acts as line manager for permanent secretaries and analogous positions. The Head of the NI Civil Service is also the Chair of the recently reconstituted NICS board. The Head of the NI Civil Service also acts as Secretary to the NI Executive. Given the structure of government, the Head of the NI Civil Service has few so-called ‘hard levers’ to pull to enforce their will. As stated, permanent secretaries are line-managed by the Head of the NI Civil Service, but formal accountability lies with the individual minister and the Assembly.

Any proposed changes to the structure of the Senior Civil Service, particularly of the role of permanent secretaries or the Head of the NI Civil Service, would need to be consistent with the constitutional framework of the NI Executive; for e.g. to make the Head of the NI Civil Service the Principal Accounting Officer for the NI Executive, analogous to permanent secretaries in Scotland and Wales, would potentially undermine the principle of power-sharing as it would mean power for deciding resources would rest with Head of the NI Civil Service who is accountable to the First

⁶ [Minister for the Civil Service](#) created in 1968 and always held by the Prime Minister

⁷ Managing Public Money NI, page 40, paragraph 3.5.4

Minister and Deputy First Minister, removing power to decide resources within departments from permanent secretaries who are accountable to their individual minister. To make Head of the NI Civil Service Principal Accounting Officer, accountable to the whole Executive would require a level of collective responsibility that simply doesn't exist. The FDA would caution the committee against making any recommendations on structural change to the NICS, SCS or Head of the NI Civil Service without full consideration of the constitutional consequences.

Chronic instability and the need for leadership

Genuine transformation to support better delivery requires political leadership but is hampered by the chronic instability that is a defining feature of politics in NI. Periods without Ministers at the helm providing much needed political leadership or periods with the Executive in place but defined by infighting leads to stasis and poor delivery. This was explained by Ann Watt, Director of the public policy think tank Pivotal, who said:

“When institutions are in place, therefore, but are unstable or fragile, difficult issues are not grasped properly because there is little time, energy or bandwidth to take on the depth of debate and scrutiny that is needed.”⁸

In a joint submission to the NI affairs committee inquiry on effectiveness of the Good Friday Agreement institutions, Former Heads of the Civil Service, Sir David Sterling KCB and Sir Malcom McKibbin and former Permanent Secretary Andrew McCormick, commented that ethical and bold leadership is critical to obtaining better societal outcomes in NI.⁹

In their report ‘Policy Delivery in NI’, Pivotal commented that “clear leadership from ministers, civil servants and MLAs is essential for delivery,” adding that “too often, ministers do not follow through on previous policy announcements or are pulled away on to more immediate issues”.¹⁰ A senior civil servant interviewed as part of the research said ministers tend to “get pre-occupied by the day-to-day” with another civil servant stating that political leadership can “unlock all other things” needed to ensure delivery.

There can be little doubt that trust between political leaders is absolutely vital to driving delivery in the public sector. As a result of the structure of our government, when trust and collaborative working break down between executive parties, stasis reigns. As stated by the two former Heads of the NI Civil Service and the former

⁸ Ann Watt, Director Pivotal, Assembly and Executive Review Committee 2025

⁹ Written evidence submitted by Sir Malcolm McKibbin, Sir David Sterling and Andrew McCormick, relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry (GFA0022)

¹⁰ [Policy Delivery in NI](#), Pivotal, June 2025

Permanent Secretary quoted above, “too often important changes were simply “parked” because the parties would neither agree nor reject them”.¹¹

This is not the fault of the civil service or civil servants who can only act in so far as elected politicians direct them to. This instability and absence of political leadership and clear vision leads to poor morale with civil servants often feeling “fatigued and dejected”. A Deloitte ‘State of the State’ report of 30 senior public servants found many had declined promotion opportunities because of the pressure of roles.¹²

Size and shape of the civil service

The size and shape of the public sector, including the civil service, is regularly the subject of media commentary, including a recent NI Fiscal Council Report outlining the pressures public sector pay place on the budget.¹³ The FDA is clear - the size and shape of the civil service is a matter for the Executive. The civil service workforce should be structured to meet the demands of public service provision as set by Ministers and the Executive. As mentioned previously, prioritisation of resources is a challenge for the NI Executive, and the structure of government means it is for individual departments to decide what size and shape is required to meet delivery needs. For this reason, we would caution against headline cuts in overall civil service numbers without a clear vision for how or what public services will be delivered. Put simply, you cannot cut the number of civil servants and expect the same level of delivery.

It is now widely accepted the Voluntary Exit Scheme (VES) in 2015 followed by a recruitment embargo was flawed. While it cut the overall civil service headcount by 10%, and reduced the pay bill in the short-term, there was little change to the level of delivery expectation from departments. The audit office themselves said:

“Best practice indicates that early departure schemes should be driven by the long-term needs of the organisation and their workforce plans, rather than purely by immediate budgetary considerations.”¹⁴

Civil service workforce plans must be developed in line with the political priorities of Ministers and PfG commitments from the Executive. It is arguable demands on public services have only risen since 2015 and while the number of civil servants has steadily increased, it has been significantly less than UK counterparts. The VES, without changes to public service provision is, in our view, one of the causes of the vacancies that currently exist.

¹¹ Written evidence submitted by Sir Malcolm McKibbin, Sir David Sterling and Andrew McCormick, relating to the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement inquiry (GFA0022)

¹² Pivotal publication ‘Policy Delivery NI’ page 14, March 2025

¹³ NI Fiscal Council Report, The NI Budget position in 2025-26, pg 39, March 2025

¹⁴ Northern Ireland Public Sector Voluntary Exit Schemes, NI Audit Office, pg 14, 2016

Budgetary challenges

Unfortunately, budget challenges remain commonplace in NI. This is most obvious with the current situation where the 1 April deadline has passed and there is no agreement on a budget. As a result, departments are operating on 95% of the previous year's budget and we've already seen overspends in a number of departments. The FDA was clear in our support for a multi-year budget that would allow for a multi-year pay deal for the civil service to be agreed, giving our members and the public finances much needed stability. A multi-year budget is not just relevant to delivering a multi-year pay deal but would provide certainty and stability for Accounting Officers and departments to allow for long term strategic planning and clear prioritisation of resources, aiding the transformation of public services. To be clear, lack of agreement on a budget, not least a multi-year budget, is antithetical to the aims of public sector transformation agreed by the Executive.

Transforming the Northern Ireland Civil Service

Despite the challenges highlighted above, transformation of the civil service is not impossible, but in order to ensure it is achievable and sustainable, it must be done within the current constitutional framework and with recognition of its inherent limitations. Transformation of the NICS has begun, particularly with the implementation of 'The People Strategy 2025-30'. This strategy provides a blueprint for how the civil service will better manage its workforce. The development and implementation of this strategy is welcome, and the FDA will be a constructive partner with departments and the NICS board to deliver on its ambitions.

However, to reiterate, effective management of the civil service workforce is not a matter exclusively for the NICS; it requires political leadership, including multi-year budgets, clear prioritisation and better working relationships between Executive parties to ensure resources are used effectively to deliver public services.

It is also important to recognise that the recent People Survey results (2025) show a rise in engagement levels and modest gains in eight of the ten areas that were considered, compared to 2023. Only one area, 'my work', saw a decrease (1%) and 'my team' saw no change. The largest increase (17%) was 'pay and benefits', a reflection of the positive 20 month pay award agreed early in 2025 compared to the paltry pay increases in 2023.

Strategic workforce planning

Strategic Workforce Planning is core to the success of The People Strategy. Currently, over 90% of NI civil servants are in ‘general service’ grades. Recruitment in the NICS remains an ongoing challenge with HR Connect unable to meet the demands of departments for large-scale general service competitions. The RHI inquiry stated “a fundamental shift is needed in the approach used within the Northern Ireland Civil Service with regard to recruitment and selection for government jobs”.¹⁵ The FDA supports the efforts by P&OD/HR to create the building blocks to allow for strategic workforce planning to ensure the right people with the right skills are in the right place at the right time. This work will, over time, allow departments and the NICS to address skills gaps by better understanding their current skills capacity and to consider what skills will be required for the future and tailor recruitment to meet those needs.

This approach should also assist in more streamlined and targeted recruitment processes allowing the NICS and departments to recruit staff based on particular skills and to run competitions faster, helping to reduce the number of vacancies.

This work is still in the early stages and while progress has been made, the FDA will continue to work with NICS management to ensure strategic workforce planning meets the needs of the workforce.

Graduate Management Programme

The worrying outcome of the State of the State report regarding lack of attractiveness of senior jobs referenced above, combined with the high median age of the civil service and the senior civil service, is a significant challenge for the future leadership of the NICS. The FDA is a strong supporter of the Graduate Management Programme, the local version of the Fast Stream. The programme allows recent graduates to enter the NICS at SO grade, gaining experience in different roles across departments, gaining promotion to grade 7, generally within three years. This programme provides a useful alternative route to working in the civil service, particularly for younger people and was recognised as a notable improvement by the Audit Office.¹⁶

The UK civil service Fast Stream is an award-winning graduate programme with significant resource to support it with the Fast Stream and Emerging Talent team in the Cabinet Office. Alongside a focus on increasing diversity within the UK civil service, the Fast Stream also has a dedicated learning and development offer including a formal induction programme (Base Camp), structured training on leadership and management skills, and further learning organised around

¹⁵ RHI Inquiry Recommendations

¹⁶ [Leading & Resourcing in the Northern Ireland Civil Service](#), page 19, 27 January 2026

professions¹⁷. This is compared to the Graduate Management Programme, which is significantly under-resourced - there is no single member of NICSP&OD/NICSHR whose only responsibility is to oversee the programme, there is little structure around the programme to support the development of participants and there hasn't been a cohort in a few years. The FDA would support a comprehensive review of this programme with the view to expansion with more resource and structure and better advertising with our local universities. We believe this would be a significant policy intervention to support a reduction in the median age and create a pipeline of future talented leaders into the NICS which is recognised as a cause for concern.

Digitalisation and the deployment of AI

The NICS has low digital maturity according to a digital maturity assessment.¹⁸ Increasing the digital maturity of the NICS is key to more effective delivery of public services. AI, in the form of large-language generative AI, could help increase efficiency in public services. The introduction of a Chief Scientific and Technology Officer, Professor Helen McCarthy, is a positive development and civil service trade unions had a productive meeting with the CSTO early in 2026 who is responsible for the AI strategy for NI.

Structured development of digital skills for civil servants is vital to fully utilising the opportunities that digitalisation and AI can bring and is a core component in the People Strategy. The FDA carried out research with the Fabian Society on civil servants' experience of AI in the UK civil service with a survey of 2000 managers across the service. The research found the majority were supportive of AI and 72% had already introduced AI into their team or would like to do so in the future. It found the key to effective deployment of AI is a clear vision for its use and access to the tools to deliver.¹⁹

There are areas across the NICS that are utilising AI in innovative ways and delivering training to officials, there is also basic training available online to all civil servants. However, there is a need for a clearer vision for the deployment of AI across the NICS, this should stem from the overarching AI strategy being worked on by CSTO, with clear guidance to departments on how AI can and should be deployed alongside guidance on the guardrails required to mitigate the associated risks. This should be coupled with structured baseline training for officials with tailored training available depending on individual's interaction with AI tools. There must be a balance between support from the centre, i.e. NICS P&OD, and department's specific needs when it comes to the deployment of digital tools.

¹⁷ [Part 1: The size, shape and development of the fast stream](#), Institute for Government, September 2005

¹⁸ Head of Civil Service, NI Assembly Finance Committee Inquiry 'Performance and Culture of NICS', 20 May 2026

¹⁹ [Adopt, Innovate, Transform report](#), FDA and Fabian Society, April 26

Pay and conditions

A key element to increasing the capacity and capability of the NICS is to ensure terms and conditions are competitive and meet the demands of the labour market today and in the future. This is key to ensuring employment in the NICS is an attractive proposition.

The Audit Office recognised there are particular challenges in areas of the NICS where pay, particularly in specialist roles, falls below the market rate. The response has been to implement recruitment and retention bonuses. While it is positive that there is action to address the shortfalls, recruitment and retention bonuses are, by their nature, a temporary solution. The long-term solution is ensuring pay does not fall behind the private sector and is uplifted across the service.

Conclusion

Transformation of the NICS is necessary but it is not the panacea to the challenges facing public service delivery in NI. Any discussion on transformation must be constrained within the complex constitutional realities of the NI system of government and the inherent difficulty of centralisation of shared services and the operational independence of departments. Transformation, on the basis of more effective workforce management, is underway with the People Strategy and particularly strategic workforce planning. Further transformation, in the FDA's view, would include investment in digitalisation and AI, particularly support for training and development in these key areas. The NICS must continue to ensure it offers a competitive employment package that meets the needs of the labour market today and in the future, ensuring it is competitive with the private sector. Likewise, investment in the graduate management programme would reduce the median age of leadership and create a pipeline of new leaders. The FDA will continue to play a constructive role in transforming the NICS, ensuring it is a good place to work, and is able to deliver better services for the public it serves.